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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 002314

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TAGS: [KISL](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [MO](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: FRENCH MUSLIM LEADER DESCRIBES BLEAK OUTLOOK FOR
SUBURBAN YOUTH, HAILS U.S. INTEGRATION MODEL (C-DI5-01478)

REF: A. 05 PARIS 4664
[1](#)B. EMBASSY SIPRNET PARIS POINTS FOR MARCH 28 2006
[1](#)C. EMBASSY SIPRNET PARIS POINTS FOR MARCH 22 2006

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Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: National Federation of French Muslims (FNMNF) president Mohammed Bechari provided a frank assessment of the current state of French Muslim communities and institutions to Poloffs March 31. Bechari described disaffected, suburban Muslim youth in the throes of an identity crisis, and facing a bleak choice between criminality and radical Islam. These youth largely reject community institutions, including the French Council for the Muslim Faith (CFCM). Bechari disputed the notion of a single French Muslim community, and described French Muslims as affiliated more along lines of religious interpretation rather than country of origin. He decried the lack of representation of French Muslims within French politics and viewed quotas as the means to redress this imbalance. He offered mixed praise for U.S. democratization efforts in the Middle East, and described his plans to found a new Islamic institute/imam training center in Lille, for which he is seeking foreign financing, including from the U.S. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Poloffs and POL FSN met with FMNF president Mohammed Bechari March 31, in the wake of press reports (ref B) of recurring divisions within the FMNF and the CFCM, the GoF's official interlocutor on Muslim religious issues. (Comment: The FMNF is the largest component group within the CFCM, and often portrays itself as the representative of Moroccan Muslims in France, though it espouses a conservative interpretation of Islam perhaps not representative of France's generally non-practicing Muslim population. The Moroccan government is believed to have a close and influential relationship with the FMNF, and Bechari in particular. End comment.)

Youth in Suburbs: Not Your Father's Islam

[1](#)3. (C) According to Bechari, young Muslims in France are generally more religious than their parents, but in very different ways. The French integration model, with its emphasis on assimilation into the dominant culture, creates identity crises for the children of immigrants, that result in the rejection of all institutions, from the state to organized religion. This rejection of institutions, when combined with a lack of educational opportunities and youth unemployment rates as high as 45 percent in some suburbs, fosters an environment ripe for radical influences. With no hope for the future, Bechari argued, the young men in suburban housing projects often face a bleak choice between a life of crime and one of radical Islam. Organizations such

as the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM), have little credibility or influence on the street due to their affiliation with the state. Bechari concluded that the GoF, and Interior Minister Sarkozy in particular, had mistakenly hoped that the suburban youth problem could be "sub-contracted" to the CFCM.

¶4. (C) Bechari added that French Muslim youth in the suburbs were exposed to a wholly negative image of the U.S., due to the combined influences of the extreme-left and radical Islam, which painted the U.S. as a hegemonic power hostile to Muslims. Bechari urged the USG to make greater efforts to reach out to French Muslim youth in the suburbs, much like the U.S. had expanded outreach in the Islamic world; he concluded that the U.S. integration model should be applied to the French suburbs, and that his own views of the U.S., once quite critical and focused on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, had evolved considerably towards embracing the U.S. concept of diversity and affirmative action. Repeating a line we have heard from many other French Muslim contacts, Bechari said that France was far from the point at which it could accept as French someone named Mohammed, regardless of how many generations his family had been in country. The same could not be said of the U.S., where one could retain one's ethnic identity without calling into question one's "American" identity.

Not One, but Many Communities

¶5. (C) Bechari dismissed the notion of a single Muslim community in France, which he said simply does not exist. Instead, he described French Muslims as aligned on lines of religious practice, for instance the "Islam des jeunes" (of youth), fundamentalist "Tabligh" school, or "family Islam," where one's Islamic identity consisted of cultural traditions conveyed by parents. Bechari did not view French Muslims as

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aligned along nationalistic lines, noting that the question of one's country of origin (i.e. Morocco, Algeria, etc.) mattered only to the older generations who first immigrated to France. He similarly downplayed the ability of countries of origins, such as Algeria, Morocco, or Turkey, to have significant influence among French Muslims.

Lack of Political Will to Embrace Minority Candidates

¶6. (C) Bechari decried the lack of political representation of French Muslims at the local and national level, and criticized the lackluster efforts of French political parties on the left and right to more actively involve minorities. "We have no mayors, no deputies," Bechari argued, concluding that the presence of two French female Senators of Muslim origin offered little hope, since the French Senate was of far less importance than the directly-elected National Assembly. He added that, in comparison to Belgium and the UK, the lack of French Muslim elected officials was an embarrassment. Although Bechari had initially opposed the idea of "American quotas," (referring to commonly held beliefs in France about U.S. affirmative action), he now believed they were needed to open the door for minorities in the French political system. Bechari indicated that voter registration efforts were necessary to increase political clout, and that there existed 3 million potential voters of North African origin.

Muslim Voting Trends

¶7. (C) Contrary to the common assumption that Muslim voters tend to be Socialist Party supporters, Bechari said that many had backed Chirac in the first round of the 2002 presidential election, specifically voting against Jospin because of his perceived sympathy towards Israel. He asserted that a small

minority of French Muslims -- harkis (Algerians who sided with the French during the Algerian war for independence) -- tended to vote for the extreme-right National Front. In the recent EU elections, however, sentiment had swung against the center-right UMP party, with nearly 90 percent of Muslim voters siding with left-leaning parties in retaliation against the center-right's support of the headscarf law. Bechari believed that Nicolas Sarkozy had lost much of the support within the Muslim community that he once enjoyed, primarily because of his proposed immigration reforms and his inflammatory remarks during the October/November civil unrest in the suburbs. "The Sarko of 2006 is not the Sarko of 2003," he remarked, referring to Sarkozy's first term as Interior Minister during which he oversaw the creation of the CFCM.

18. (C) The political left, Bechari commented, was fractured, with people waiting for a clear candidate to emerge. Fabius was not a suitable candidate, he judged, and Segolene Royal lacked gravitas. Bechari thought Dominique Strass-Kahn could be appealing if partnered with former Social Cohesion Minister Martine Aubry. He thought Chirac remained the sympathetic favorite for most French Muslims, due to the continued perception that Chirac is "pro-Arab," and despite Chirac's many failures on the domestic front. Personally, Bechari confided, he had a soft spot for Prime Minister Villepin, with whom he had worked closely to secure the release of the two French journalists held in Iraq when Villepin was the Interior Minister.

U.S. in Middle East: Yes to Democratization, Except in Iraq

19. (C) Bechari urged the U.S. to continue democratization efforts in the Middle East, and stressed the need to work together to separate moderate Islamists from radical extremists. Democracy would ultimately provide stability in the Middle East, he reasoned, without which jihadism would continue to rise. Bechari viewed the U.S.-led liberation of Iraq, however, in highly negative terms. Excusing himself in advance for his candor, he described USG efforts as creating a "government of mullahs" in Iraq while forging unity between the extreme left and radical Islamists in Europe. He also commented that Saddam Hussein was currently winning the media war in Iraq with his grandstanding performances at his trial.

Poloff questioned Bechari's mischaracterization of Iraq's democratically elected leadership, which was seeking to form a government of national unity responsive to all Iraqis, including Sunnis. Poloff also reminded Bechari of the disastrous humanitarian toll of Saddam Hussein's regime. Bechari replied that he was no fan of Saddam, but that opposition to the U.S.-led war in Iraq had, in his view, replaced the Palestinian question as the most important foreign policy issue to many French Muslim youth.

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CFCM Troubles and New Institute for Islam

110. (C) Bechari spoke little of the CFCM, an organization of which he is a vice president. When he finally did address the CFCM, he dismissed it as irrelevant. "The CFCM is not a religious institution," Bechari stated, "only the administrator of a religion." Bechari indicated that he was instead focusing his efforts on a recently announced institute and research center to be founded in Lille to focus on Islam and Islamism (ref C). One of the primary goals of the institute will be to deal with the many problems facing French imams, specifically lack of French-born or even French-speaking imams, and continuity of message. Bechari said that only eight of 860 imams operating in France were French, so the institute will teach French language and civics as well as provide theological training. Sarkozy was not supportive of the idea, Bechari noted, because the state was not involved. Bechari added that he would soon travel to

Morocco and Egypt to meet with religious authorities, including Al Azhar university, to seek funding for his Lille institute. He was unabashed in asking if U.S. financial support was available for programs such as the institute in Lille. He lamented the fact that USG Muslim outreach funds were focused in the Middle East, when there was also a war to wage for Muslim hearts and minds in Europe.

Comment:

¶11. (C) Bechari is currently in a power struggle within his FMNF organization, and his departure from the CFCM to concentrate on the new institute in Lille may be due more to political pressure within the CFCM than his own disillusionment with the organization. Bechari's criticism of Sarkozy at several points during the conversation was notable, especially since he had expressed support for the Interior Minister in previous meetings. This power struggle, and Bechari's rumored imminent departure from the CFCM and FMNF may also explain in part his new-found openness towards the U.S. We should also point out that although Bechari cautioned against considering the French Muslim community as a single entity, throughout the discussion he made sweeping generalizations about Muslim voting patterns and French Muslim youth, when in fact he appeared to be referring to a specific subset of disaffected, crime-prone young males in the French suburbs, not representative of French Muslims as a whole. That said, and despite Bechari's criticisms of USG policy in Iraq, we viewed him as forthcoming on the bleak outlook facing young Muslim males in the French suburbs, sincere in his appreciation of the U.S. approach to immigrants and democratization, and worthy of further USG attention. End comment.

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Stapleton